



CORONERS COURT OF QUEENSLAND

FINDINGS OF INVESTIGATION

CITATION: **Non-inquest findings into the death of Walter William Cowell and Joan Iris Jean Cowell**

TITLE OF COURT: Coroners Court

JURISDICTION: Brisbane

DATE: 28 June 2016

FILE NO(s): 2014/2786 and 2014/2787

FINDINGS OF: John Hutton, Brisbane Coroner

CATCHWORDS: CORONERS: Investigation, missing person, suspected death

FINDINGS REQUIRED UNDER SS. 45(1)-(2) OF THE CORONERS ACT 2003

I find as follows:

- Walter William Cowell is deceased.
- The identity of the deceased person is Walter William Cowell, born on 28 November 1923.
- Walter William Cowell died at an unknown date in 1983.
- Walter William Cowell died at an unknown location.
- The circumstances of Walter William Cowell's death are outlined below.

I find as follows:

- Joan Iris Jean Cowell is deceased.
- The identity of the deceased person is Joan Iris Jean Cowell, born 23 February 1925.
- Joan Iris Jean Cowell died at an unknown date in 1983.
- Joan Iris Jean Cowell died at an unknown location.
- The circumstances of Joan Iris Jean Cowell's death are outlined below.

EVIDENCE, DISCUSSION, AND GENERAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF DEATH

Background

Mr Walter William Cowell and Ms Joan Iris Jean Taylor commenced their relationship in 1941. Mr Cowell was employed as a farm labourer in Mackay and Ms Joan Taylor was employed as a Sunday School Teacher at a Presbyterian Church in Walterston, near Mackay. Mrs Cowell was one of seven children. It is unknown how many siblings Mr Cowell had.

Between 1942 and 1944, during World War II, Mr Cowell served in the Australian Army in Papua New Guinea, where it is believed that he participated in front-line fighting with Japanese soldiers and was exposed to close quarter hand to hand combat.

When Mr Cowell returned home to Mackay in 1944, he worked casually as a farm labourer and continued his relationship with Ms Taylor. He did not speak about his war experience but it is believed by family members that Mr Cowell developed post-

traumatic stress disorder and depression as a result of his war service. He has been described by family as fairly quiet, non-aggressive, unsettled, regularly agitated, and highly strung. It was observed that his hands would shake. Mr Cowell appears to have been on medication for his condition. He was also in receipt of a pension from the then Department of Repatriation (now Department of Veteran Affairs) for his war service.

Mr Cowell and Ms Taylor married on 24 April 1948 at St Paul's Presbyterian Church in Mackay. Following their marriage, they moved out to Te Kowai in Mackay, where they both worked on a sugar cane farm as pickers.

As a couple, Mr and Mrs Cowell have been described by family as gentle souls, who were quiet, non-drinkers, and rarely went out socially, with the exception of family weddings and occasional family visits. They did not openly display affection, but they were devoted to each other. They never argued or fought and there was no domestic violence in their relationship. Their son-in-law, George Bishop, has described Mrs Cowell as a controlling person. He states that Mr Cowell did not want to upset her and that he was like a 'puppy dog' around her.

Mr and Mrs Cowell had two children. Family has described them as devoted parents. Their son, Allan Riven Cowell, was born on 7 October 1949. Their daughter, Christine Joan Cowell, was born on 18 August 1955.

In 1960, Mr and Mrs Cowell left the sugar cane farm with their two children and moved to a house in Harbour Street, Mackay. It was at this time that their son, Allan, appears to have developed signs of mental illness.

In 1968, Mr and Mrs Cowell and their children moved from Harbour Street, Mackay, to a house at 11 McKinlay Street, Mackay.

In 1970, Mr and Mrs Cowell's daughter, Christine, met her partner, George Bishop, in Mackay and they began living together in a defacto relationship. They never married but they had six children together (two of which have deceased). Christine took on the name 'Mrs Bishop'. Mr and Mrs Cowell's family were under the impression that they were not happy about Christine marrying George, perhaps because Christine was too young (as she was about 10 years younger than George).

Around the time that Christine and George Bishop began their relationship in 1970, Mr and Mrs Cowell's son, Allan, moved to Brisbane. Mr and Mrs Cowell moved to Ross Creek in Yeppoon, where they purchased a fishing charter boat and began a fishing charter business.

In 1973, Mr and Mrs Cowell sold their fishing charter boat for an unknown reason. They packed up their vehicle with limited possessions, and 'disappeared' without contacting anyone for two years.

It has been suggested by the police investigating officer that Mr and Mrs Cowell had been travelling throughout Queensland picking fruit at various farms and plantations in an attempt to earn additional money on top of the pension Mr Cowell received from the Department of Veteran Affairs. Mrs Cowell's brother, Collin Taylor, and his wife, Bernice Taylor, state that they had heard that Mr Bishop had a drinking problem and

that part of the reason Mr and Mrs Cowell disappeared was because they were hiding from Mr Bishop, because he kept asking them for money. They state that this is what Mr Cowell had conveyed to Mrs Cowell's brother, Eric Taylor at the time. Eric Taylor has since deceased.

In 1973, Christine and George Bishop moved to Brisbane for a couple of years, where Mrs Bishop gave birth to twins. One child was still born, and the other had down syndrome and was adopted, before dying at the age of around 18 or 19 years.

It would appear that in 1975, Mr and Mrs Cowell moved back to Mackay for a period of time. Christine and George Bishop moved from Brisbane back to Mackay to move in with them, as Christine wanted to be closer to her mother.

Whilst Mr and Mrs Bishop were living with Mr and Mrs Cowell, they had their third child. Mr Bishop states that he observed at the time that Mrs Cowell seemed to be suffering from some mental illness. She was forgetful and would put things away like money and forget where she had put them. He states that in general, Mr and Mrs Cowell were in good health, they ate well, and their house was fairly neat. He did not have any concerns about their ability to take care of themselves at that time.

Mr and Mrs Bishop moved out of Mr and Mrs Cowell's house after about 6 months because Mr Bishop felt that Mrs Cowell was interfering and living with his wife's parents was not good for their relationship. Soon after, Mr and Mrs Bishop separated. Mrs Bishop moved to Brisbane. Mr Bishop believes that Mrs Cowell contributed to the breakup with his wife.

It would appear that Mr and Mrs Cowell made Wills with the Public Trustee Office on 18 April 1975. These Wills have not been sighted.

Between 1976 and 1977, Mr and Mrs Cowell's son, Allan Cowell, was 'institutionalised' in a mental health facility at Wolston (known as 'the Park') on a number of occasions, due to deterioration in his mental health. Mr Bishop states that Allan was a big and powerful man and would become violent towards his parents when he failed to take his medication. He states that Allan would stand over them for money and threaten them, but he never saw Allan become violent with them.

In January 1977, Mrs Bishop gave birth to her fourth child in Brisbane and named him Shawn Cowell (not Bishop). Soon after, Mr and Mrs Bishop reconciled and relocated to Bulimba. Around the same time, Mr and Mrs Cowell sold their house in Mackay and relocated to a Caravan Park at Goodna. They moved there to be closer to their daughter.

Mr Bishop states that when Mr and Mrs Cowell moved to Brisbane, they did not have any furniture or anything in storage. They did not have any family photographs or personal effects of any note, other than a new television. Their car (a red 1965/66 Ford Futura with a white roof) was their only possession of note.

On 19 April 1977, Mr Cowell forwarded a notification to the Department of Veteran Affairs advising them of the details of his new Local Medical Officer, Dr J. MacD Reid, whose surgery address was 35 Teaps Street, Silkstone.

On 13 July 1977, Mr Cowell forwarded another notification to the Department of Veteran Affairs advising them that his mailing address had changed from 11 McKinlay Street, Mackay to C/O Ipswich Post Office and that his bank account had changed from the Commonwealth Bank, Mackay to the National Australia Bank of Australasia Ltd.

In 1978, when Mr and Mrs Cowell's daughter, Mrs Bishop, learned that they had relocated to Goodna, she wanted to be closer to her mother so that she could reconcile with her. As a result, Mr and Mrs Bishop applied for, and were granted, approval to move into a housing commission home at Goodna. They had their fifth and sixth children at Goodna in 1978 and 1979.

Around this time, Mrs Cowell became ill and was admitted to the Royal Brisbane Hospital, where she underwent a full hysterectomy. Details of her medical condition, which led to her operation, are unknown. However, Mr Bishop states that Mrs Cowell never fully recovered.

Mr Cowell began working for Telecom in Goodna as a labourer. Mrs Cowell attended to home duties. Soon after, Mrs Bishop became very ill and was hospitalised. She was operated on and it was discovered that she had cancer.

In April 1979, Mr and Mrs Cowell purchased a home at 56 Napier Street, Birkdale, in Brisbane. Mr Cowell retired. This was their last known fixed address.

Mr Bishop states that he recalls that when he helped Mr and Mrs Cowell clean their caravan out at Goodna whilst they were moving to their house at Birkdale, he found a roll of money hidden in the caravan. He did not count the money. He gave the money to his wife to give to Mr and Mrs Cowell. Mr Bishop states that this indicated to him that Mr and Mrs Cowell were forgetting where things were.

Around this time, Mr and Mrs Bishop and their four children moved to the opposite side of the city, to Redbank Plains. Mr and Mrs Cowell's son, Allan Cowell, moved into a caravan park at Wellington Point near Mr and Mrs Cowell new residence. Allan would walk to his parent's house at Birkdale to visit them from time to time.

Mr Bishop states that when Mr and Mrs Cowell moved to Birkdale, they did not have any friends and were not in any social or community groups. He would describe them as 'secretive' or 'loners'. They could hold a conversation and talk about topics other than themselves. However, if the conversation was turned to what they were doing, they would change the topic. He states that Mr and Mrs Cowell had bought second hand furniture, including a fridge.

Mr and Mrs Cowell did not have their phone on at Birkdale, so Mr and Mrs Bishop could not phone them. Mr Bishop states that they did not visit Mr and Mrs Cowell at Birkdale often as they lived on opposite sides of the city. On the two occasions that they did visit, Mr Bishop recalls that Mr and Mrs Cowell seemed to be showing their age and they were getting frailer. Mr Cowell's hands were shaking more than usual.

Between 1980 and 1982, it would appear that Mr and Mrs Cowell began to go away on trips to various regional locations in Queensland for fruit picking employment. During this time, they had very little contact with family.

However, in 1981, Mr and Mrs Cowell did visit Mrs Cowell's mother, Marjorie Taylor, at her home in Mackay. This was around the time that Mrs Taylor had begun to suffer from dementia. Mrs Cowell's brother, Collin Taylor, and his wife, Bernice Taylor, happened to visit whilst Mr and Mrs Cowell were there.

Mr and Mrs Taylor state that Mrs Cowell was quiet normal and her usual self, except that she was wearing an unusual bra/breast plate from the 'olden days'. Mrs Taylor states that the bra/breast plate was vastly different from what Mrs Cowell would normally wear, which made her think that maybe she was in a cult or something. They state that they did not discuss Mrs Cowell's clothing or any other intrusive questions with her, as they did not want to upset Mrs Cowell. They state that they spoke about how Mrs Cowell's father had passed away, and other light topics. They state that Mr Cowell seemed quite normal but was not overly talkative.

Mr and Mrs Taylor think that Mr and Mrs Cowell stayed at Marjorie Taylor's house for several weeks. Mr and Mrs Taylor never saw or heard from Mr and Mrs Cowell again. Marjorie Taylor has since passed away.

Some time in 1982, it would appear that Mr Cowell's half-brother, Alick Christensen, saw Mr and Mrs Cowell at Illawong Beach in Mackay and spoke with them. He is deceased now but he advised his son, Keith Christensen, that Mr and Mrs Cowell were staying at an Illawong Beach Caravan Park at the time when they asked him if they could borrow money. Mr Christensen had lent them some money. Mr and Mrs Cowell had said that they would pay the money back, but Mr Christensen never saw or heard from them again.

In October 1982, Mr and Mrs Cowell stayed at Mrs Cowell's brother in law's house in Nambour for a period of time. The source of this information is a handwritten letter from Mrs Cowell to her brother in law, George Neilsen, dated 27 October 1982. A copy of the letter has been provided by Mr Neilsen's son, Norm Neilsen, in an Affidavit dated 4 July 2011.

It would appear that the letter was written by Mrs Cowell just before they left Mr Neilsen's house. It reads as if they had stayed at his house whilst Mr Neilsen was in hospital with ulcers. The letter makes reference to Mr Neilsen having been transferred to the Royal Brisbane Hospital. It would seem that a person by the name of 'Phil' was also staying at Mr Neilsen's house whilst Mr and Mrs Cowell were there. No witness has been able to identify who Phil was.

In the letter, Mrs Cowell goes into some detail about their car repairs. It would appear that they were staying in Nambour until their car could be repaired. Mrs Cowell apologises to Mr Neilsen for 'overstaying' at his house. She says that 'Chris' (which is clearly a reference to her daughter, Christine Bishop) had finished her radium treatment for a couple of months; otherwise Christine could have dropped in to see him (presumably at the Royal Brisbane Hospital).

In the letter, Mrs Cowell advises that she will fix Mr Neilsen up for the extra electricity, when they next go there to visit him. She says that she left a dollar there for a few phone calls she made. Mrs Cowell explains that Mr Cowell did not wish to stay with Christine and George (Bishop) on account of there not being enough room, as Christine had a 'woman friend' there to do the work and she would leave if they stayed. Mrs Cowell also states in the letter that they rang their boss and they needed to get back as they had to start work the next day. Mrs Cowell did not mention where they needed to get back to or where they were working for at the time. Mr Neilsen has since deceased.

Mr Bishop is not sure of the exact date due to the passage of time, but he states that sometime between May and September 1983, Mrs Bishop's cancer worsened and she was hospitalised at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane. A short time after Christine's admission, both Mr and Mrs Cowell attended the hospital to visit his wife. Mr Bishop is perplexed as to how they knew his wife was in hospital, as he had not notified any family.

Mr Bishop states that during Mr and Mrs Cowell's hospital visit, he advised them that Mrs Bishop had only been given 18 months to live. He states that Mr and Mrs Cowell told him that they had been picking tomatoes in the Gympie area. He states that he was very surprised at this as their health was not good. Even though they were both only around 60 years of age, they appeared older - both physically and mentally. He states that he had never heard of them doing something like this before. He states that Mr Cowell was not the sort of person who looked for things to do to keep himself busy. He states that Mr and Mrs Cowell would not, or did not, tell him where they were staying. They continued, as always, not to talk about themselves. This was the last time Mr and Mrs Bishop saw Mr and Mrs Cowell.

In an affidavit signed in 2011 by Mrs Cowell's brother, Collin Taylor, he states that his sister, Mrs Condon, received a letter from Mr and Mrs Cowell in approximately July 1983 requesting financial help. Mrs Condon is now deceased. Mr Taylor believes that money was forwarded to Mr and Mrs Cowell by Mrs Condon and she later received a thank you letter from Mrs Cowell.

However, a slightly different version has been provided about this issue by Mr Taylor in his statement to police dated 26 October 2012. Mr Taylor states that Mrs Condon told his wife that Mrs Cowell had asked her that if she had any spare money to give it to the Brown Sisters Charity. The Brown Sisters Charity had been assisting Mrs Bishop when she had cancer. They may have also given money to Mrs Cowell, and possibly also to Mr Bishop later down the track to help pay for his wife's funeral. The source of this information is Mrs Condon's daughter (also of the same name). The thank you letter to Mrs Condon from Mrs Cowell is believed to have been the last communication she made with family.

Also some time in 1983, the Department of Veteran Affairs appears to have identified that the pension cheques that were being forwarded to Mr Cowell were not being cashed. After the disbursement of several more cheques that also remained uncashed, the Department discontinued Mr Cowell's pension. The Department was unable to advise the exact date that this occurred; only that this happened in 1983. This is because Mr Cowell's pension file was destroyed years ago in accordance with

a disposal authority set down by the National Archives of Australia.

Mr Bishop states that late in 1983, he and his wife attended Mr and Mrs Cowell's residence at Birkdale, to see if they had returned. He states that they discovered a note addressed to 'George and Christine', which said words to the effect: "Could you look after the house till we come back". He states that the note was written on a piece of paper and left on top of the t.v inside the dwelling. The note was not signed, however, Mr Bishop was convinced that it was Mrs Cowell's handwriting as the words and the way in which the letters were styled in each word, were identical to her handwriting. He states that all of the unique characteristics were consistent with the way Mrs Cowell structured previous letters and she had always addressed written correspondence to the two of them. The note was not kept.

Mr Bishop states that weeks later, he returned to Mr and Mrs Cowell's Birkdale residence again and observed that the grass around the house was overgrown and the doors were all unlocked. The inside of the dwelling was in a state of disarray and the walls were covered with food products that had been stored in the refrigerator. He states that he attended the neighbouring property and spoke with the occupant (who incidentally was a police officer). The neighbour advised him that he thought that the dwelling had been abandoned and he had observed children in the neighbourhood using it as a 'play house'. He did not know how long Mr and Mrs Cowell had been gone for, as they did not speak to their neighbours.

Shortly after, Mr and Mrs Bishop moved out of their home at Redbank Plains and into Mr and Mrs Cowell's Birkdale house, with their four children. Mr Bishop states that they did this with the intention of maintaining the house until Mr and Mrs Cowell eventually returned. The council rates for the property remained in Mr and Mrs Cowell's name, however, Mr Bishop took over the payment of the rates and has maintained them ever since.

On 7 October 1983, Mr and Mrs Cowell's son, Allan Cowell, committed suicide on his birthday by drowning himself in the Brisbane river. Police attended Mr and Mrs Cowell's Birkdale address on 9 October 1983 in an attempt to locate them to formally identify their son's body. Mrs Bishop was too ill to leave the house, so Mr Bishop attended the identification viewing.

Mr Bishop states that in November 1983, he wrote a letter to Mr and Mrs Cowell advising them of their son's suicide and Christine's imminent death. He states that he posted it to them 'C/O the Gympie Post Office' on the off chance that they may have travelled through Gympie and established a post office box there. No reply to the letter was ever received.

Family attempts to locate Mr and Mrs Cowell

Mr Bishop states that in January 1984, he and his wife attended the Gympie Post Office in person to enquire as to whether Mr and Mrs Cowell had established a post office box there. It was their usual practice to set up a post box at any given location if they were spending any length of time there. Mr Bishop states that the Post Master advised them that Mr and Mrs Cowell had in fact set up a PO Box there. He informed them that it had been several months since he had seen Mr and Mrs Cowell. (Police

were unable to establish the identity of the Post Master for questioning).

Mr Bishop states that the Post Master checked Mr and Mrs Cowell's rented PO box and produced the letter that he had sent to them following Allan's death. He states that he observed that the envelope had been opened and he asked the Post Master who had read the letter, and when. The Post Master would not disclose who had accessed and read the letter and advised them that the handling of the letter was "all above board". It is not clear what happened to those letters.

In early 1984, Mrs Cowell's brother, Collin Taylor, states that he made contact with all family members about the whereabouts of Mr and Mrs Cowell. No one in the family had seen or heard from them, so he reported them missing in April 1984 to the Rockhampton Police Station. He states that he was advised to contact the Missing Persons Program run through the Salvation Army.

On 10 April 1984, Mr Taylor attended the Salvation Army and lodged a request for assistance. He has produced a receipt for a small administrative fee that he paid for this purpose. He states that the Salvation Army ran an extensive series of television advertisements between May and June of 1984, seeking information relating to Mr and Mrs Cowell's disappearance, however no one came forward.

In May 1984, Mr and Mrs Taylor attended the Gympie Post Office, whilst travelling through the area, to enquire whether Mr and Mrs Cowell had established a post office box there. It would appear that they did not have any knowledge that Mr and Mrs Bishop had also attended the same post office in January, making similar enquiries. Mr Taylor states that the Post Master advised them that Mr and Mrs Cowell had rented a PO box but they had not collected their mail for approximately one year. He states that the Post Master retrieved two letters from the PO Box. The first letter was a plain envelope addressed to 'Bill and Joan' and the second letter appeared to be a vehicle registration letter. Neither envelope was opened and the Post Master placed them back into the PO Box.

In May 1984, Mrs Bishop's condition worsened and she underwent radium treatment at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane. On 4 June 1984, Mrs Bishop died.

Mr Bishop states that when his wife died, he did not try and contact her parents. He was struggling enough to deal with it all, so he did not bother trying to find Mr and Mrs Cowell, especially as he had not heard from them and they never responded to his letter when their son, Allan, died. He did, however, place a funeral notice in the newspaper. Mr and Mrs Cowell did not attend the funeral or send any messages to any family members.

Mr Bishop states that relatives of Mrs Cowell who lived in Brisbane attended his wife's funeral, as they had seen the newspaper notice. This was the only time he met them and he cannot recall their names. He states that they told him they would let the relatives in Mackay know about his wife's passing. They also discussed that they had not heard from Mr or Mrs Cowell for 18 months.

After Mrs Bishop's funeral, Mr Bishop states that he made some enquiries to establish the whereabouts of Mr and Mrs Cowell. He was aware that they had a bank account

with the Commonwealth Bank at Booval as his wife had been handling their affairs prior to her death and he had attended the branch once in the past with Mr Cowell. He states that he spoke with the Bank Manager at Booval and explained the situation. He states that the Bank Manager was not allowed to tell him much, but he did say that Mr Cowell's war service pension had been stopped. He thinks that the Bank Manager told him that this was done automatically when the account had not been accessed for three years. The Bank Manager indicated that no transactions had occurred on that account for some time.

Mr Bishop also states that shortly after his wife's death, he asked a friend who worked for Social Security or its equivalent in the 1980's if he could find Mr and Mrs Cowell, as he was getting desperate to let them know about their daughter's death. He states that his friend advised him that he could not find any trace of Mr and Mrs Cowell in Queensland, Victoria, or New South Wales. Mr Bishop does not know which system his friend checked but he assumes he conducted checks in relation to their pensions.

On 28 February 1985, Mrs Cowell's mother, Marjorie Taylor, died at her home in Mackay. Again, Mr and Mrs Cowell did not attend the funeral or send any messages to any family members.

Mrs Cowell's brothers, Collin Taylor and Eric Taylor, were appointed as the executors of their mother's estate. Mrs Cowell's mother left a share of her estate to Mrs Cowell. The executors instructed their solicitor, Paul Pentridge, to use a percentage of Mrs Cowell's share to fund a further attempt to locate her. Mr Pentridge forwarded letters to various organisations, including the Department of Veteran Affairs. The Department confirmed that Mr and Mrs Cowell's pension had been stopped in 1984, as the cheques they were forwarding to Mr Cowell had not been cashed. The Department advised that Mr Cowell had not updated his forwarding address since the last notification (i.e. he had not advised them of the Gympie PO Box).

Also in 1985, Mr Bishop states that he attended the Cleveland Police station to report Mr and Mrs Cowell as missing. He states that he was advised by a uniformed police officer that they would need to be missing for a minimum of seven years before a report could be taken.

In 1990, Mrs Cowell's brother, Eric Taylor, died. His wife, Jessica Taylor, and his brother, Collin Taylor, took over the management and distribution of their mother's estate. All funds had been distributed from their mother's estate except for Mrs Cowell's share. Since Mrs Bishop was the only remaining child of Mrs Cowell and had also died, they attempted to locate Mr Bishop. They located him at Mr and Mrs Cowell's Birkdale address and agreed that he could access his wife's share of the estate for their children before the age of 18, for school fees and other living expenses. As the children grew older, they also made applications to the trust for various expenses. Mrs Taylor's estate was eventually paid in full over the next several years.

In 2002, Mr Bishop's daughter, Melissa Bishop, states that she contacted the Salvation Army and requested further checks be conducted in an attempt to locate her grandparents' whereabouts. However, the Salvation Army did not have any success.

In 2004, after 20 years of residing at Mr and Mrs Cowell's house at Birkdale, Mr Bishop

moved back to Redbank Plains. His son, Jason Bishop, and his son's wife moved into the Birkdale property and took over the payment of the council rates.

In 2009, Mr Bishop and his daughter, Melissa Bishop, engaged the services of Colville Johnstone Solicitors at Cleveland, in an attempt to locate Mr and Mrs Cowell. The purpose of this was so that they could sell Mr and Mrs Cowell's Birkdale property. Over the next few years, Colville Johnstone Solicitors attempted to locate Mr and Mrs Cowell, without success.

In 2012, due to the failure of Colville Johnstone Solicitors to locate Mr and Mrs Cowell, and their accumulating legal fees, Mr Bishop retained the services of an alternative solicitor, Rod Holloway. This was again for the purposes of selling Mr and Mrs Cowell's Birkdale property. Mr Holloway advised Mr Bishop that he would need to report the matter to the police.

As a result, Mr Bishop and his daughter, Melissa Bishop, formally reported the disappearance of Mr and Mrs Cowell to the police on 3 August 2012.

Police investigation

This case was referred to the Cleveland Criminal Investigation Branch, who commenced an investigation in conjunction with the Queensland Police Missing Persons Unit.

The investigation took close to two years. A police investigation report was provided to the State Coroner on 19 June 2014. I note that their investigation was thorough.

The police investigation included:

- Checks with all interstate missing persons units;
- Enquiries with numerous financial institutions nationwide; Centrelink; Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages nationwide; Queensland Health and major hospitals and morgues; Medicare Australia; the Public Trustee; the Department of Veteran Affairs; the Department of Immigration and Citizenship; and the State Coroners Courts nationwide;
- Obtaining statements from living relatives of Mr and Mrs Cowell, including:
 - A statement by George Con Bishop (son in law of Mr and Mrs Cowell) dated 10 October 2012;
 - A statement by Collin Frank Taylor (brother of Mrs Cowell) dated 26 October 2012;
 - A statement by Bernice Margaret Taylor (wife of Collin Taylor and sister in law of Mr and Mrs Cowell) dated 25 October 2012; and
 - A statement by Melissa Maree Bishop (daughter of George Bishop and

granddaughter of Mr and Mrs Cowell) dated 25 October 2012;

- Obtaining records from previous searches conducted by the law firms instructed by Mr and Mrs Cowell's family and Affidavits, including:
 - An Affidavit by Norman Neilsen (nephew of Mrs Cowell) dated 4 July 2011;
 - An Affidavit by George Con Bishop dated 28 June 2011; and
 - An Affidavit by Keith Christensen (nephew of Mr Cowell) dated 2011.

In addition, on 18 May 2013, the Police Media Branch distributed a media release to all media outlets nationally. On 3 June 2013, a press conference was held outside the Cleveland Police station. Exerts of the press conference were aired on Channel 9 news and broadcasted on the internet via the Queensland Police Service web site and YouTube. A number of newspapers also covered the story.

The police investigation has been complicated by the passage of time, the death of several key witnesses, and a lack of records kept by relevant institutions in archives.

Police efforts have failed to produce any evidence to indicate that Mr and Mrs Cowell are still alive.

To date, no unidentified bodies or remains have been matched to Mr or Mrs Cowell through DNA or other identification techniques. There has also been no trace found of the vehicle owned by Mr and Mrs Cowell at the time of their disappearance. There have been no confirmed sightings of Mr and Mrs Cowell for 33 years.

The investigating police officer, Detective Senior Constable Michael Fernald, does not believe that Mr and Mrs Cowell met with foul play. He suspects, taking into consideration the circumstances and mental state of Mr and Mrs Cowell, that they travelled to a remote location and took their own lives.

The police investigator is not of the opinion that any benefit would be served by holding an inquest.

Coronial jurisdiction

On 28 August 2014, I was directed by the State Coroner, Mr Terry Ryan, to investigate the suspected death of Mr Cowell pursuant to s 11(5) and s 11(6) of the *Coroners Act 2003*.

Section 45(1) – (2) of the *Coroners Act 2003* provide that when investigating a suspected death, the coroner must, if possible, find:

- whether the death happened, and if so:
 - the identity of the deceased;

- how, when, and where the death occurred; and
- what caused the death.

Assessment of the evidence

I note that if Mr Cowell was still alive today, he would be turning 93 years of age this year and Mrs Cowell would be 91 years of age. The chances of them surviving to such ages, given their mental health and medical conditions are slim.

There have been no confirmed sightings of Mr and Mrs Cowell for 33 years since 1983. I find that it is unlikely that they would have lived past 1983, without contacting family, or the Department of Veteran Affairs to continue payment of their pension. An extensive investigation by police has failed to produce any evidence of life after 1983.

Having carefully considered all of the available evidence surrounding Mr and Mrs Cowell's disappearance, I find that Mr and Mrs Cowell are deceased. I find that it is likely that they died at an unknown location on an unknown date in 1983.

I do not have sufficient evidence to make a finding as to the cause of their deaths.

It is unclear whether Mr and Mrs Cowell had any knowledge of their son's death and their daughter's death at the time of their disappearance.

The extent of Mr and Mrs Cowell's mental health and medical conditions at the time of their disappearance and their financial situation is also unclear.

I do not agree with the police investigating officer's opinion that the evidence supports a conclusion that the likely cause of death of Mr and Mrs Cowell was suicide. It is possible that they intentionally took their own lives. However, it is also possible that they were involved in an accident (such as a vehicle accident) in a remote area, where their bodies and vehicle have not been discovered. It is also possible that they met with foul play. There are a range of possibilities, all of which are speculative.

I offer my sincere condolences to Mr and Mrs Cowell's remaining family and hope that these findings will provide them with some closure.

I close the investigation.

Coroner John Hutton
Brisbane
28 June 2016